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**Testimony on Heirs' Property and Land Protection in the Virgin Islands
Submitted for the Record**

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Honorable Senators,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on this important issue. I also express my gratitude to Senator Marise James for extending the invitation and for her leadership in ensuring that the lived experiences of Virgin Islanders are part of the heirs' property conversation.

My name is Virginia Clairmont. I was born and raised in Frederiksted, St. Croix. After nearly 30 years away, I made the intentional decision to return home in 2014 to invest my time, skills, and energy in helping Frederiksted grow into the vibrant community it deserves to be.

I am submitting testimony today to speak about heirs' property, land protection, and why this issue is urgent and solvable.

In the Virgin Islands, land is not just property. It is history. It is identity. It is resilience, the kind rooted in the belief that freedom was not only possible but inevitable. It is proof that our ancestors endured long enough to claim the land they were once forced to work without choice or pay.

When families lose land, they do not just lose an asset. They lose stability, dignity, and connection to place.

I want to briefly share how my own work connects to this issue.

In 2021, while serving as Executive Director of Clean Sweep Frederiksted, our organization received a grant from the Housing Assistance Council, in partnership with the National Endowment for the Arts, through the Citizens' Institute for Rural Design. That grant supported a community-centered redesign of the Frederiksted Fish Market.

As part of that project, members of the Housing Assistance Council team traveled to St. Croix. One of those team members was Natasha Moodie, at the time a research associate with HAC. We provided them with an immersive experience of our community. By the end of their visit, they understood that place, history, and people are inseparable here.

Natasha and I remained in contact, and she continued to share national research, policy conversations, and grant opportunities that could be relevant to Frederiksted and the Virgin Islands. Later, when Natasha began focusing nationally on heirs' property, she made a deliberate decision to include Frederiksted in that work. She reached out to me to explore a partnership, and I immediately accepted. I did so because heirs' property is one of the most damaging economic threats facing Virgin Islands families. Moreover, national

research, funding, and policy discussions frequently overlook the territories. I wanted our voice to be included in the national conversation.

Natasha's work at the Housing Assistance Council has helped elevate heirs' property as a housing, wealth, and equity issue, not merely a legal one. Including Frederiksted ensured that the Virgin Islands are visible in national conversations and considered in future funding strategies.

What resulted from our participation was the creation of the 15-minute documentary *Elevating the Story* and an invitation to participate in the 2025 Heirs' Property Symposium and Housing Assistance Council Conference. This project brought the Virgin Islands to the attention of national experts, federal government agencies, and major financial institutions.

I want to acknowledge the Legislature for taking meaningful steps, including passage of the Uniform Real Property Transfer on Death Act, which is now law. That action gives families a simple, low-cost tool to plan for the future and avoid unnecessary complications. That matters.

But legislation alone will not protect family land.

Families also need education, affordable legal assistance, help updating deeds and records, and protection from predatory buyers who exploit unclear ownership. Care must also be taken with any derelict or abandoned property legislation, because many properties that appear abandoned are in fact family land caught in legal limbo.

Policy Requests

1. Fund community-based education on wills, probate, and title clarity.
2. Support affordable legal services for heirs' property resolution.
3. Establish strong safeguards to prevent displacement through technical or administrative failures.
4. Ensure the Virgin Islands remain included in national heirs' property research and funding opportunities.

The issues raised today are real, serious, and solvable. Our ancestors were resilient, intentional, and future-oriented. They believed freedom would come. It did. The responsibility now rests with us to protect and finish the work they began.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony for the record and for your commitment to providing the people of the Virgin Islands the quality of life they deserve.

Respectfully,
Virginia Clairmont